

The 4 R_s

Support for Indigenous Education in Schools

What First Nations people are seeking is not a lesser education, and not even an equal education, but rather a better education — an education that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives.

(Kirkness & Barnhart, p.14)



by

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The opening quote shares the words of Indigenous trailblazer Verna Kirkness and her writing partner Ray Barnhardt, from their 1991 paper, “First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R’s – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, & Responsibility”. This paper demanded change in higher education for Indigenous students that were being pushed out of the classrooms and were not able to finish school. Kirkness and Barnhardt lay out the systemic barriers that are in place in colonial institutions that do not allow for the success of Indigenous students. The key points they outlined were that Indigenous students do not feel welcome, comfortable, or safe in colonial institutions, mainly because they do not see themselves reflected in the learning or the learning process. Without the ability to see themselves and *be* themselves in colonial spaces, Indigenous students are being asked to leave their culture and traditions at the door. It is challenging and not sustainable to leave a part of who you are as a person in order to learn. The paper was directed to higher education and universities, but it is so relevant to the K-12 system today.

The western colonial education system's approach to fixing these issues that Indigenous students face is to establish supports such as counseling programs,

graduation coaches, writing programs, and so forth; Kirkness and Barnhardt speak to the reason supports such as these fail, as they do not address the problems that Indigenous students encounter in the system. The programs are a reinforcement of the assimilation that the western colonial system wants from students. When the system looks at what they can do to ‘fix’ the problem, they always look at the students as the problem and ‘blame the victim’. This reminds Indigenous students on a daily basis that they need to change into someone else and leave their Indigeneity at the door in order to take part in the western colonial system. Most research from school districts focuses on how Indigenous, Black, and students of colour are feeling in the system, instead of spending that time and money on researching *why* and *how* the system is not able to create the space for Indigenous, Black, and students of colour to succeed. Refocusing the lens in which we view the system will create the space needed for the change that Indigenous, Black, and students of colour need to succeed. As Kirkness and Barnhardt explain:

It is not enough for universities to focus their attention on "attrition" and "retention" as an excuse to intensify efforts at cultural assimilation. Such approaches in themselves

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have not made a significant difference, and often have resulted in further alienation. Instead, the very nature and purpose of higher education for First Nations people must be reconsidered, and when we do, we will find that the entire institution, as well as society as a whole, will be strengthened and everyone will benefit. (p.14)

I agree with Kirkness and Barnhardt in their argument that if we change the system for the betterment of one, it will help support the betterment of all. If we put their 4 R's – respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility – into steps for action within the education system, the hope would be that these spaces could change for the better, not only for Indigenous students, but for all IBPOC (Indigenous, black, and people of colour) students.

Respect.

As an action in schools, using myself as an example, respect would mean that those in the building are seeing me in my wholeness, as an educator and an Indigenous person. My wholeness is knowing that my Indigeneity comes with layers of institutional racism and oppression. I believe that one thing that could show Indigenous people respect in the system is for people to listen. Instead of talking for us, or over us, or about us, respect would mean that those who hold positions of power are taking the time to really listen: listening to listen, and not listening to respond. It would also mean that educational spaces were intentionally being created for Indigenous voices to be heard and honoured. This would make educational spaces safer for Indigenous people, and provide an opportunity for them to thrive. One of the most important elements grounded in respect is that if you personally make a mistake, that you take ownership of that mistake and apologize, and add an action step to the apology. Words without actions are just words.

Relevance.

Since the 1972 “Indian Control of Indian Education” paper (National Indian Brotherhood, Canada. Indian, & Northern Affairs, 1972), Indigenous people of this

land known today as Canada have been demanding Indigenous representation in the classroom. If the classrooms are continuing to tell the single-sided story of this place, without the true shared history, then we will never find a way to be here together. Educational spaces should be filled with stories and representations of Indigenous people, and not just the trauma they have endured. If we only tell the stories of trauma, then we will never have the opportunity to share our brilliance. We need to have Indigenous voices, Indigenous authors, Indigenous content, and – most importantly – Indigenous brilliance in all classrooms. This will create the space for Indigenous students to see themselves within educational spaces, and give Indigenous students the opportunity to thrive.

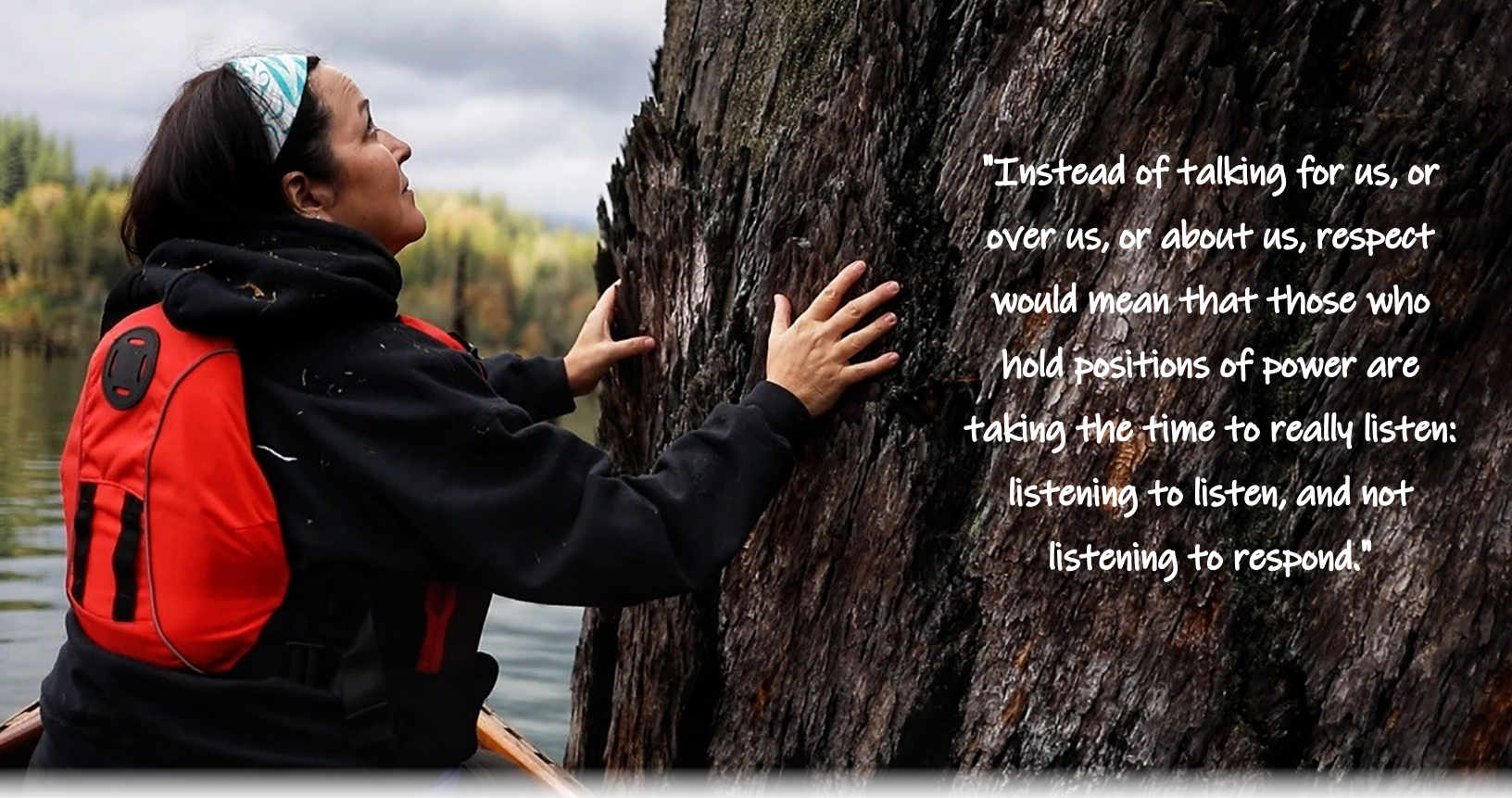
Reciprocity.

Margaret Kovach speaks of reciprocity as “giving back” (2021); Jo Ann Archibald (2008) describes it as listening with our three ears, two on the side of our head and the third is with our heart. School communities can be a reciprocal place for learners when they move away from students solely as consumers of knowledge. Learning is a two-way street: having students be a part of the learning process, in a participatory way, is critical. If schools continue to use the western colonial idea of education, where the educators are all-knowing and students passively take it all in, we will continue to produce people who sit back and wait for things to be given to them, rather than people who are problem solvers, thinkers, knowledge keepers, and their own beings. In leadership roles, this action step means that you are open and willing to listen to Indigenous people, creating space for them to share their worldview and lived experiences, and creating space for the change they are asking for in the education system.

Responsibility.

Beginning with The Bryce Report in 1907¹, report

¹ www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/IRSR11-12-DE-1906-1910.pdf



"Instead of talking for us, or over us, or about us, respect would mean that those who hold positions of power are taking the time to really listen: listening to listen, and not listening to respond."

after report has been issued demanding change in Indigenous education for Indigenous children. Indigenous students need to be able to see themselves in education in order for them to succeed; it is the responsibility of the school system to make sure that this happens for students. Leaders in schools can take action steps to create spaces of learning so that the educators in the building have the support needed to teach and learn about Indigenous education. Leaders must also take action steps to create spaces for all staff to learn about race and racism, and ways to engage with these topics in the classroom. The reflective component of this work is critical: as a leader, how are you holding yourself responsible for creating a welcoming and warm environment for all Indigenous students and Indigenous adults in the school building? Where in your personal growth plan

are you including your own learning about Indigenous education, race, and racism? This action step turns the learning inward, looking at what you need to learn in order to support those around you to learn and grow.

My hope with these action steps and questions is to reach those who are in positions of power, and who have the ability to intentionally shift how the work is done in schools. This intentionality will create the space for Indigenous students to be their whole selves in education, without having to leave a part of themselves at the door. With this work, we have the opportunity for the next generation of Indigenous children to feel like they belong in education, see themselves in education, and thrive in education. This will take critical and intentional work from you, the leaders in education. My hands are raised in deep gratitude to those who are doing this work.

References

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